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Chickenhawk

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"He's just like a flower in bloom. He's at that perfect stage, in which he is hermaphroditic... He's in that wonderful limbo between being a child and an adolescent--he's certainly an adolescent, but he has that weird feminine grace about him." This paean to a fetching youth is sung by every mother's worst nightmare--a pudgy, fifty-something self-proclaimed pedophile. He is Leyland Stevenson, the star of *Chickenhawk*, a riveting documentary about the dreaded North American Man/Boy Love Association, or nambla. The producers of the film, an independent company called Film Threat Video, have the unenviable task of de-vilifying their reviled subjects. And if my experience trying to see the film is typical, even the few theaters willing to show the film extend a cold hand. Our local alternative movie house, although it doubles as a porn theater by day, was embarrassed to hold its usual press screenings or take out ads. Instead, the theater showed *Chickenhawk* for two nights, hoping no one would notice, then hid it away in the basement. Gay video distributors refused to stock the film, fearing they would trigger sinister associations between homosexuality and pedophilia. I only found out about it when a press release came over the fax machine. Luckily, it will finally be released on home video next month.

It's worth seeing. Despite the obstacles, the film succeeds, at least partially, in making monsters human. There are no steamy orgies, or bound-up boys languishing in nambla's basement. The 1,500 member organization, founded in 1979, functions mainly as a support group for fantasizers, with the requisite forums for victim-bonding. There are roundtables where the men hug and exchange persecution stories, and bulletins written in tones of righteous indignation. There are also the normal pleas for subscriptions (go ahead, take the plunge). The art in the bulletin is a joke on censors. The pages feature a collection of Kodak-moments--two boys on a fishing boat squinching in the sun, one boy in a bathing suit leaping backwards into a lake, a boy in shorts playing in the sand--in short, a typical Bruce Weber portfolio. Group policy strictly forbids contact with live boys or even illicit pictures on the premises; any frustrated members annoyed with nambla for not providing the forbidden fruit are answered in stern legalese: "Dear Friends: Please be advised that police and postal inspectors from this and other countries make a living by entrapping boy lovers who are desperate for the kind of materials you enquire about."

There is some bravery in nambla members keeping all their activities above board (their phone number in New York is published). After all, it is still heresy even to consider the possibility of the legitimacy of their feelings. The taboo has gotten even stronger of late. Two years ago, after the infamous Knox case, President Clinton was cowed into taking a courageous stand against "softness on child pornography," after the Senate voted 100-0 to condemn the Justice Department for its narrow (and completely accurate) interpretation of the anti-pornography statute. As part of the Contract with America, the House passed this year, 417-0, the Sexual Crimes Against Children Prevention Act, which

toughens sentences for child pornographers.

Some of the movie supports this anathematization of pedophile attraction. Leyland, for example, sees a come-on in every little boy's smile. As he recounts casual conversations with boys, he describes how they flirted with him, when it's obvious this is the furthest thing from their minds. Take Leyland's version of the time he gave a ride to two local boys, the subject of his earlier paean and the boy's little brother: "Mike was 12, Anthony 13. I was driving along a road in West Virginia, and the wonderful thing about it was it was no fuss at all." (Here the camera closes in on his fleshy jowls.) "Both went out of their way to flirt, in their own way, with me... They flirted in a very flagrant but wonderful way, that made it completely obvious that they were flirting in a sexual way, because this is their nature." Cut to the ruddy-cheeked, clean-cut boys, shooting hoops in their driveway. Here's Anthony: "We knew he was kinda weird... He was asking us questions like, like all kinds of stupid questions and every time we'd say something to him he'd take out a piece of paper and write it down." Hearing that, it becomes easier to sympathize with one West Virginian father, who warns: "I'd probably kill him. Honest I would. If he were to bother my kids."

But elsewhere, the movie provokes more subversive thoughts. Is it plausible, for example, that a teenage boy might agree to sex with an older man? The film places the practice in immemorial convention, offering the Spartans, the Greeks, the Samurais and the tribes of New Guinea as cultures where men initiate boys into the ways of the world. And in the Netherlands, the age of consent is 16, although adults are not prosecuted if the child is older than 12. There are other examples. Leyland describes how a few years ago, he struck up a friendship with a teenage boy he met on the beach "who was very responsive to my friendship." They went on a camping trip, "arranged by him the boy, in which the intent was to achieve intimacy. This was his idea." To get his wish, the boy zipped together the two sleeping bags, "so no barrier to creation of this experience would exist." That night, under the stars, Leyland realizes his sweetest reverie, as he dreamily recounts in excruciating detail.

Maybe Leyland is once again manipulating the memory. But at least the objects of his lust we do meet never accuse him of accosting or even touching them. Though we never see the boy he went camping with, it's possible to imagine a timid gay teen shyly seeking his first experience with an older man. It might even be that a budding young stud had the upper hand over the aging, overweight loner. One nambla member in his 20s, an enticing blond with slits for blue eyes, describes a sexual experience he had with a karate instructor when he was 10. "I came on to him. I knew what I was doing. I felt very empowered. I felt I controlled the relationship, which is a good thing for a kid. It dispels the belief that adults are always in power in such relationships. You know, I led him around. I was the one in power."

Obviously, it's a rare instance where even an older teen might consent. With younger teens, and certainly children, the question of consent itself is shady--children are always eager to please, and all sorts of creeps are ready to exploit. Many of nambla's members have served jail time, including Leyland, who was caught carrying kiddie porn photos taken in India. But is the idea of mutual consent so absurd? As one nambla member puts it, "I think children in this society should be treated in a different way. Children are human beings. They need responsibility, love and recognition." Certainly a self-serving view, but still plausibly on the continuum of, say, a defense of children's legal autonomy.

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